



just

Life is short, as the saying goes, so eat dessert first. For those of us who crave a daily dose of sugar, the Windy City can satisfy a sweet tooth from morning to night.

Tasty eye-openers

The early bird will be rewarded at **Vanille Pâtisserie**, which crafts edible works of art. As the name suggests, this is pastry with a French accent. Vanille's co-owner, Dimitri Fayard, began his training at age 16 at the Lycée Pédailhan, and later scored a silver medal in the 2003 National Pastry Championship. He and his wife Keli, a Chicagoland native and accomplished pastry chef in her own right, opened Vanille to fulfill a life-long dream.

And a sweet dream it is. Dimitri recommends the Amelia, an elegant cylinder of chocolate mousse, passion fruit, cream and pineapple cloaked in a glossy, dark chocolate glaze. The chocolate-averse may prefer Amelia's fair cousin, the St. Lucie, another cylinder, but this one feathery white, filled with exotic cream, pineapple confit and coconut cake. Another eye-catcher is the Elode, a sort of Technicolor napoleon, striped with raspberry.

Vanille specializes in catering, wedding cakes and takeout pastries, but a few tables are provided for those who just can't wait long enough to take their treats home.

If you greet the day longing for Mom's kitchen and some good, home-style treats, **Sweet Mandy B's** can help. Beneath the cheerful yellow- and white-striped awnings, the doors open at 8am—just in time for a sugar fix to brighten the morning commute. The specialty of the house? "Traditional, old-fashioned desserts," says owner Cindy Levine.

Everything is made in-house and menu highlights include monster-sized cookies, brownies, toffee squares, muffins and holiday cut-out cookies. For even bigger appetites, Sweet Mandy B's offers seasonal fruit pies, cream pies, cheesecakes, sheet cakes and puddings. Child-friendly snacks include the Dirt Cup, a mix of chocolate cake, whipped

desserts

Get yours at Chicago's sweetest spots

by Kay Daly

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cream and Oreo cookie crumbs. Levine has her own favorite: "The chocolate and yellow cupcakes," she says. "You want to slide your finger right in the frosting."

Take a break

Who says mealtime is the only time to indulge? **Australian Homemade** offers taste bud-tickling treats for between-meal snackers from 10am until late at night. Brand new to the United States, this international chain has 60 stores worldwide and specializes in fresh, all-natural ice creams and chocolates.

And in case you didn't catch it, "fresh" and "all-natural" are the watch words. "Milk, eggs, sugar—it's that simple," says Maura Kenny, who manages the Lakeview store. Each batch of ice cream takes about eight minutes to make, and fresh batches are made all day long. Favorite flavors include tiramisù and Belgian chocolate. According to Kenny, the quality in the cone comes from what they put in. "For the Belgian chocolate ice cream, we melt down real Belgian chocolate," she says.

You can also indulge in gourmet chocolates filled with cream centers of orange and ginger, almond and even Earl Grey tea. As befits the Down Under theme, each chocolate is stamped with a symbol from aboriginal art.

Sweet reasons to clean your plate

Everyone knows dessert is a sweet reward for finishing your dinner. And while you'd need no

such incentive at **Gibsons Steakhouse** or **Hugo's Frog Bar and Fish House**, you'd be wise to save a little room—not that it would be easy. The restaurants specialize in huge portions, and that goes double for dessert. "Our large portions are designed to be shared," explains Mike Clark, the director of operations for both Hugo's Frog Bar and Fish House and Gibsons Steakhouse.

The hefty portions encourage a raucous, "grab-and-share" style of dining, which attracts a loyal clientele of celebrities and Chicago bigwigs. But maxing out on size doesn't mean skimping on quality. Take, for example, Clark's favorite, the Strawberry Shortcake. Fresh California berries and whipped cream ride aloft a buttery, crisp biscuit. Each serving measures eight inches tall and five inches across. The dessert line-up at Hugo's and Gibsons features a constantly changing selection of fruit pies, cream pies and cakes.



If you want to sample enormous, whimsical desserts in the city or suburbs, opt for **MASCK**. The original location in Deerfield packs in the patrons, and a recent River North opening continues to spread the appeal of this stylish, contemporary American eatery. **MASCK** offers a mod, gallery-like ambience paired with Mag Mile-caliber cuisine.

But face it: Any upscale restaurant that lists as its claim to fame the "Floppy Cheeseburger" (a trademarked specialty) knows that good eats extend beyond a classy entrée. Fittingly, topping the menu at **MASCK** is—surprise,

surprise—doughnuts! Inspired by the beignets of New Orleans, these golden puffs arrive in a must-share portion with hot fudge for dipping.

Many of MASCK's desserts play on similarly homey themes, such as the Mile-High Banana Cream Pie (served with a mini chocolate-dipped frozen banana and a puddle of hot fudge) and the Big Dipper (a decadent take on the caramel apple).

For an after-meal treat with fusion flair, try **Mas**. Through their innovative menu, co-owners Hubie Greenwald and John Manion explore new flavors and exciting combinations with a mostly Nuevo Latino accent. "We want to offer something different, something interesting, something no one has had before," Greenwald enthuses.

That statement especially applies to Mas' desserts. "I tell my chefs to try any flavor they can think of," Greenwald says. So while the menu changes often, playful experimentation is a constant. Consider the Quattro Chocolates, which

brings together four tiny treats, including a white chocolate pistachio pyramid, a marble chocolate mousse with white chocolate sauce, Oaxacan hot chocolate and molten chocolate cake with triple-chocolate gelato. Other crowd pleasers include the Trio de Peras (organic poached pears with a caramel-sherry gelato) and the Maple Syrup Flan, served on a waffle cookie and topped with heirloom apple topping.

But for Greenwald, the pièce de résistance is the Dulce de Leche Gelato. "It's simply the greatest ice cream of all time," he says.

The night life, the sweet life

Chicago nightlife is like a sumptuous buffet. Bars, clubs, gallery openings—there's a lot to choose from. And that's especially true for those who like to sweeten things up as the sun goes down.

For old-school elegance, sample **The Peninsula Hotel's** weekend chocolate bar. Known as Chocolate at the Pen, this sweet indulgence



MASCK

offers sensory overload with nearly unending chocolate options in a luxurious setting. A \$26 cover provides total access to the Pen's glorious chocolate dessert bar, plus unlimited coffee, cappuccino or espresso. For \$35, you can upgrade with a Chocolate Martini.

The menu changes weekly, but expect to see



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Peninsula's lobby every weekend. Enjoy the chocolate buffet from 8pm to midnight on Friday and Saturday evenings.

If you want to get your heart pumping with more than a sucrose high, check out **Sugar: A Dessert Bar**. Sugar, the nation's first and only dessert bar, offers all the sweets you could wrap your tongue around set to the pounding rhythms of the dance floor.

The décor sets the tone, evoking "Hansel and Gretel" but with a techno beat. Plush booths are upholstered in rich chocolate brown, and the rooms are accented with candy-fruit colors and honeycomb artwork. On the plate, you'll find a heady array of tempting tastes, many named after literary masterpieces. Favorites include MacDeath by Chocolate, a molten chocolate cake accompanied by chocolate sorbet, and the Marquis de Sucre, a sugar platter created with the same method used to blow glass. The menu also offers an expansive selection of dessert

wines, champagnes and super-sweet cocktails.

The mastermind behind the sweets is Christine McCabe Tentori, whose dessert expertise has catapulted her up the culinary ladder. Formerly of Gabriel's in Chicago, Joel Robuchon's in Paris, and Metropolitan in Salt Lake City, McCabe Tentori also worked at Chicago's esteemed Charlie Trotter's. She has earned a Jean Banchet nomination for Rising Pastry Chef.

A really sweet beginning

What better way to bid adieu to a day full of dessert than to greet a newcomer? Dessert chef extraordinaire Mindy Segal, formerly of **MK**, will branch out in January of 2005 to open her own urban café. Named **Hot Chocolate**, this casual eatery focuses on everyday fare—sandwiches, salads, soups—as well as mouthwatering desserts. In addition to sweet endings for in-house meals, Segal offers a full cake service, with treats including her milk chocolate toffee cake. 

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